

# Wild Life in the Benue Valley

## Fifty Years Ago

By Bunsuru

*With a drawing by the Author*

THE Article "Notes on the Larger Fauna of the Benue Valley" by Mr. F. A. Lewis in the issue of the *Nigerian Field* of January 1955 was read with much interest by two Northern Nigerian Administrative Officers who knew the area about fifty or more years ago. One of them, Mr. K. V. Elphinstone (Resident, Northern Nigeria, 1902-21) spent most of his service on the River Benue, and has contributed the following notes for use in this article.

He writes : the greatest number of snipe I saw were in the swamp at Yola ; but the birds, being in large numbers, were too wild. The best snipe shooting I had was in Ilorin quite close to the railway station. I believe these were painted or common.

About 1908 on a trek from Wase to Muri I passed many old tracks of elephant and saw a large area, three or four acres, trampled absolutely flat. I was told that the elephants had danced there, and I must say that the tracks seemed to confirm this. Do elephants dance together ? The tracks on the ground might very well have been the tracks which Petersen Sahib saw in "Toomai of the Elephants" by Rudyard Kipling. I never saw the elephants, but once I heard one scream near Yelua. After the rains one was apt to see elephant tracks over many parts of Muri, Adamawa (North and South, away from the rich farming districts close to the R. Benue). There was a herd between Lake Chad and Geidam. The late Lord Henry Seymour shot a bull near Chad about 1912. The area in the Article by F. A. Lewis was seldom visited by Political Officers as it was uninhabited East of Wase for some distance.

Buffalo were common in all the thick bush, especially along the R. Benue, as also were lion. Why lion roar more in the rains I have often wondered. It was seldom that one did not hear lions roar during the night along the Benue during the rains.

When on a trek from Awe to Ibi one evening, I walked on ahead of my column, armed with a walking stick only. Just as it was getting dark three lions began grunting from thick bush close to the path—very frightening. I walked on, as I saw no good in remaining still, and reached our camping place in safety. The lions I heard hunting and grunting going away from the track. This must have been in 1906.

In the dry season of 1903 or 1904 the late Hans Vischer camped with a caravan some miles East of Ibi. During the night a lion jumped on a man and took him off. And it was here where a Niger Company clerk killed two cubs, and maybe the mother. When I was at Amar a lion skin and skull were given me by Tafida Isa. A farmer, working on his farm near Sendridi, saw a lion about to pounce upon his small child. He picked up his bow and arrows, flicked off an arrow, and shot the lion dead with an arrow in the eye—a tremendous fluke, as I never saw anyone who was anything but a really bad shot with a bow and arrow or a spear.

Not only have I held many shooting competitions in fun, but I have also experienced both bowmen and spearmen trying their best to hit my friends or myself with no success.

There used to be occasional hippo in the main stream of the R. Benue, and many were in the tributary rivers, especially the R. Katsina Ala. There were always some in some pools North of Ibi on the right bank of the river. Giraffe I never saw in Muri Province, but I did in Bornu. I did see their tracks in the part of Muri described, i.e., East of Wase. They were North of Yola, near Song, Goila, and in Bornu. The late Sir William Gowers killed one on the Song-Yola road in 1904 or 1905. I remember seeing the tracks of giraffe near Jebjeb, and I got quite close to a mother and child in Bornu: natives say that they go to sleep with the head resting on a tree, and this is what I always maintain I saw. I got within a few paces of her, the youngster running about wondering what I was, and the mother asleep with her head resting on the upper branches of a gum acacia tree. I did *not* shoot her! A fine sight cantering, and their leg action makes them roll like a ship at sea.

I agree with Mr. F. A. Lewis that leopard are much commoner than one would think; though I often heard them coughing at night I never saw one, and seldom came across their tracks.

Hyena used to come into Ibi and all the towns along the R. Benue from Ibi to Yola. They used to come close up to our bungalows at Yola.

Jackals, I thought, were in Bornu, or at least some animals used to come round us, which we decided were jackal.

I never saw the hunting dog North of the R. Benue in Muri. They are South of the Benue in Muri and I once came across them in Bornu, and, I think, in Adamawa.

Waterbuck were common along all the rivers. I shot several for the carriers. The meat must be very rank as the beasts leave a strong scent behind them, especially in the early morning, when the dew is on the

ground. I could myself smell them very strongly. I once saw a remarkable sight up the R. Taraba. Going upstream on the top of the rains to Bakundi one could see masses of snakes hanging on the trees, not just a few but hundreds. They had been driven there by the land all being flooded.—K.V.E.

Mr. Elphinstone's notes have revived memories, supported by entries in my diaries, which enable me to add the following recollections :—

My first experience of the R. Benue Valley was a journey, taking fourteen days, by poling barge from Lokoja to Ibi in March 1909. At the height of the hot season such a journey would be very monotonous for anyone not interested in natural history, especially bird life. The heat and glare off the water about 3 p.m. was very trying. There was little wild life to be seen on the river other than birds. Crocodiles were fairly numerous, but hippo were few, and confined to the deep pools, where they only showed their nostrils, eyes and ears, and submerged while the barge was still a long way off. Birds were of great interest, but identification was impossible to a stranger. Abel Chapman's books on the wild life of the Nile would have been most useful, but *Savage Sudan* and *Memories* did not appear until twelve and twenty-one years later, and there was no "Bannerman". Boyd Alexander's book *From the Niger to the Nile* had a chapter on the Birds of the R. Benue—but it was packed up in my kit. It was only later that one was able to identify the magnificent Fish, and Bateleur Eagles, the egret and various herons, the Skimmer or Scizzor-billed Tern, the Saddle-billed Stork, and that strange bird the Open Bill, the various geese and ducks including the ubiquitous and very edible Whistling Teal or Whitefaced Tree Duck, the Black-Winged Stilt, the Wattled and Spur-winged and various other Plovers.

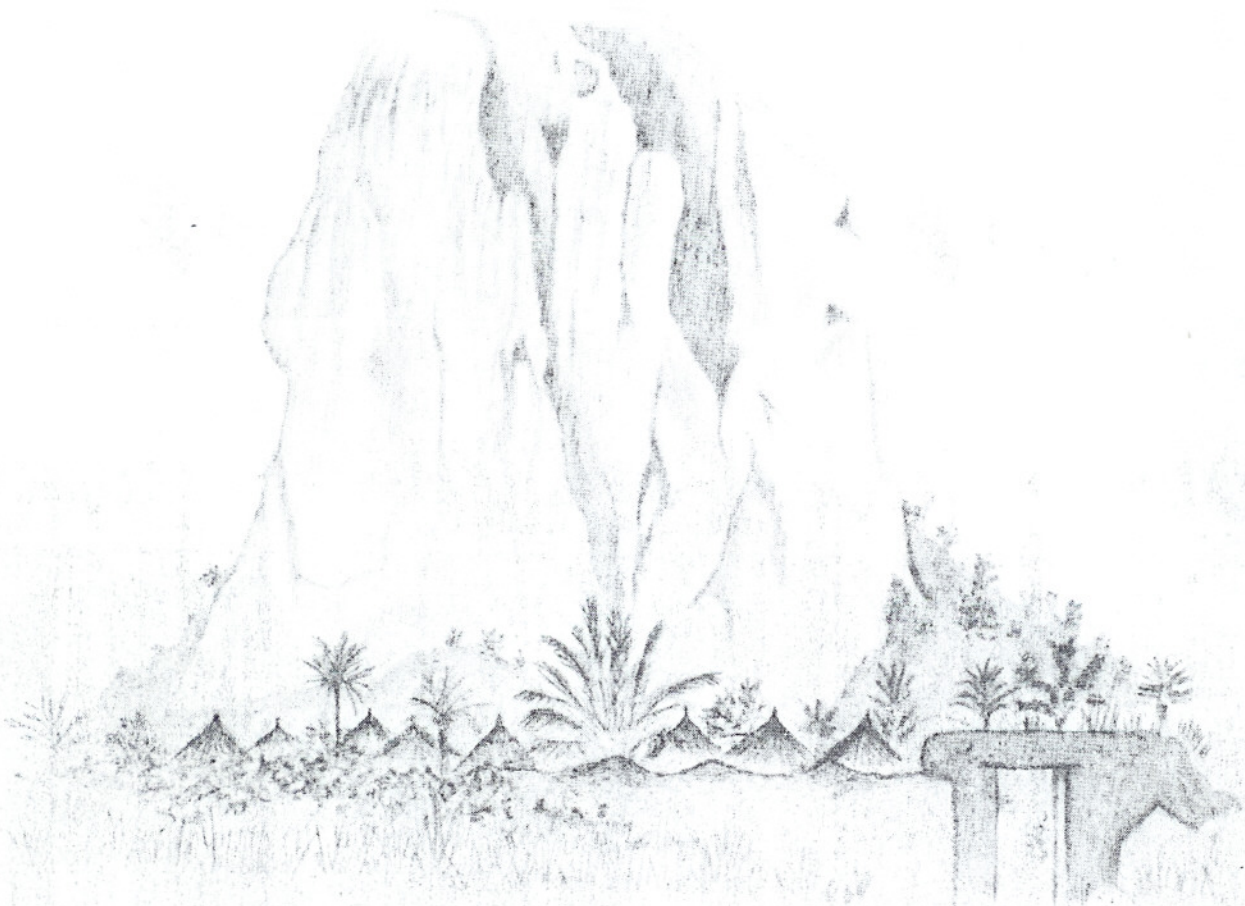
Some years later a Political Officer in Southern Nigeria, who, when soldiering, had been stationed at Lokoja, told me that the snipe, which breed in the Masurian Lakes in East Prussia, do a seasonal migration to South America, and on this journey, they halt to rest on the island at the confluence of the Rivers Niger and Benue at Lokoja. They drop down in wisps in an exhausted and emaciated state and stay a week or ten days feeding up before resuming their journey. Their next halt was said to be St. Helena. I never returned to Lokoja and was unable to check this report. Someone else may care to do so now.

In the dry season the river stream was reduced to a comparatively narrow bed, often shallow with occasional deep pools. It was bordered by vast sandbanks so that the mainland was usually invisible and any game there was out of sight to the traveller. In the rains the whole river was a

rushing flood and the adjoining lands inundated, so that no wild game was visible. Crocodiles were numerous in the Benue and its tributary the River Katsina. I never visited the Rivers Taraba and Donga nor those on the North Bank.

One evening at Lau, at the height of the rains, I saw a crocodile struggling up river against the full stream with its head well out of the water and in its jaws a very large fish, apparently a Nile perch. By the time my rifle arrived (with 12-bore cartridges) the creature was out of sight.

In 1911 at Katsina Ala a crocodile, lying out on a sandbank, was shot dead by P. Lyon commanding the W.A.F.F. Detachment there. It measured 12 ft. 3 in. and was the largest I saw. Out of it came a freshly swallowed python measuring 12 ft. 6 in.; also a woman's beads and bangles and ninety-six river pebbles. There was strong competition for these as they were "good medicine". They were said to indicate that the crocodile was ninety-six years old. Some weeks afterwards the Chief of Katsina Ala, Malam Awdu Dan Zenuwa came to see me, sucking one of these pebbles. He told me it was a sovereign remedy for toothache. I made several journeys by barge on the R. Katsina, from the end of 1909 to early in 1912, while the Tiv country was being opened up and assessed. These journeys never lacked interest. On the first one from Abinsi I began to count the hippos but soon gave up, there were so many. They took very little notice and we were often within twenty or thirty yards of them some lying in the shallows or out in the sandbanks, the young ones sometimes standing on their mothers' backs. Later some of them made as though to attack the barge or canoes, but usually sheered off in the last few yards. On one occasion, however, when I was travelling down river with Dr. Watson of the W.A.M.S., we were hit so violent a blow below the water line that the barge rocked over so far that all the breakfast things shot off the table into the river. The hippo surfaced almost alongside and we both fired at him. He was immediately afterwards attacked by another and the two stood up on their hind legs tusking each other. It was a wonderful sight of which we did not see the end, as the fight was still going on when we rounded a corner out of sight. The Tiv hippo trap was a broad bladed poisoned spear with a very heavy oval mass of dried clay plastered on the end of the stout shaft and suspended overhead in the bush above the track down which the hippo would slide into the water. The spear would be released by the displacement of a stick used as a trigger in the path. The spear appeared to strike the animal at the base of the back of the neck. A block of wood attached to the spear by a vine rope floated on the river and indicated where the body was, if it had not come to the surface. I saw two or three of these kills and was offered meat, which



The Wase Rock

I refused but accepted the tusks. I shot an old bull in 1911 opposite the Niger Company's wharf at Katsina Ala. It had been driven from the herd and was doing damage to local farms. The meat was most useful for the Coronation festivities. Some years later I was told that increased river traffic had driven the hippo from the river into the adjoining swamps and lakes. So I suppose the wonderful natural zoo, which I was lucky enough to see, no longer exists.

*Elephant.* In May 1909, near Gateri and on the border of Muri and Bauchi Provinces, I was told by local hunters that game was not nearly so abundant as formerly; that about twenty years before, large numbers had died off suddenly and the losses had never been made up. This is

interesting as the date appears to agree with that of the great rinderpest scourge which swept across Africa about twenty to twenty-five years before and caused great destruction among game and the Fulani herds. It was supposed that elephant were immune to rinderpest, but on this occasion it was expressly stated that elephant died in large numbers. Further the hunters informed us that a herd of elephant annually trekked from the South, either from the Cameroons or Southern Nigeria, crossed the R. Benue near Jibu, passed up between Amar and Wase and turned East and thus on towards the Tangale peak. Further the hunters positively affirmed that in addition to the migratory herd there was a herd living permanently between Amar and Wase, two herds in the Yuli-Jebjeb country (evidently those referred to by Mr. Elphinstone) and a further herd at the Tangale Peak. Before the rinderpest scourge numbers lived in the valley between Gateri and Bashima and did much damage to the farms. Both elephant and giraffe were reported killed in July and early August of 1909 by Ligri hunters between Ligri and Bashima. The elephant was one of a large herd. There were said to be always a few giraffe thereabouts at that time of year. Except on this occasion in that neighbourhood I never came across any news or trace of giraffe in the old Muri Province. Some years later I found confirmation in Benin of the report of the migratory herd of elephant from the South. In the Ologbo Forest between Benin and Sapele there was a herd which was reported to make a seasonal migration northward and to cross the River Niger at some point North or South of Idah and move northward through Bassa country towards the Benue.

*Rhinoceros.* No one knew more about the game of the Benue valley fifty years ago than Mr. Taggart, the Niger Company's agent at Numan and Yola. Years later he told me in Zungeru that when he was in Yola he knew of fourteen rhino, thirteen to the North of the River and one solitary male which remained permanently on the South side. One rhino was reported in North-East Muri in 1909 and added to the Province's game list. At some time, date unknown, one crossed the River Gongola and was reported in South Gombe.

*Lion.* As Mr. Elphinstone's notes indicate, there were many more lions along the Benue valley than most people realised. I have heard a lion roaring in the evening when sitting in the compound of a bungalow in Ibi and two lions were reported as coming down to drink on the North bank of the river for two or three nights in succession opposite the Niger Company's wharf at Ibi in 1909. In the same year during the rains, when in bed at Mutum Bui, I listened to a lion roaring in the big swamp which extended from Mutum Bui to the river.

*Leopard.* I heard one 'coughing' south of Muri in 1909, much to the interest of my carriers, and I saw one come down to the bank of the R. Benue to drink on the afternoon of 27 November, 1910, when I was travelling up the river in Steam Canoe 'Black Swan' to Abinsi—a journey which took nine days, compared with thirteen days to Ibi in a poling barge in March 1909. I have a note of the following mileages on the R. Benue, provided, I think, by the Marine Department:—

Lokoja to Mozum	13 miles	Abinsi to Tunga	36 miles	
on „ Romaisha	29 „	on „ Ibi	24 „	—60 miles
„ „ Amageddi	22 „	„ „ Amar	65 „	
„ „ Loko	21 „	„ „ Lau	70 „	
„ „ Abinsi	80 „	„ „ Numan	60 „	
		„ „ Yola	47 „	— 242 miles
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Total	165 miles	Total	302 miles	

Thus from Lokoja to Yola by river was 467 miles.

Most of us travel with our eyes fixed on ground level, but a Political Officer in Muri, interested in Forestry and Arboriculture, used to look upwards, examining the trees, and twice he saw leopard stretched out on tree branches above the path.

*Bush Cow.* Plentiful throughout the area and in the Tiv Country, wherever there was thick cover. A British N.C.O. at Abinsi in January 1910 went out at dawn and shot three bush cow with a carbine, in three shots, and was back in the station before breakfast.

*Antelope.* Kob and West African Hartebeeste were plentiful but the Benue Valley was too far South for gazelle and Senegal Hartebeeste. The Kob and Hartebeeste usually appeared to be in small herds of up to twenty head, but twice I saw a very large herd of kob on the flats between the foothills near Muri Town and the Benue. This herd was by far the largest I saw in Nigeria and may have numbered up to a hundred animals. It reminded me of the pictures of antelope herds in East Africa. Are there two races of kob? The "upland" and the "swamp"? A good head of the "upland" appeared to be about sixteen inches, but the "swamp" race went to over twenty inches. I got one of nineteen inches in Hadejia and saw another near Abinabo with a quite exceptional head. Major Lord John Cavendish got one of twenty-one inches near Lake Chad in 1909. Kob used to wander freely through the station at Abinsi at night, and could be heard whistling nervously as they crossed the roads and paths. These kob were a herd which lived in the orchard bush and

laterite hummock country, just south of the station. I used to amuse myself by stalking their leader, a fine buck with quite a good head, and seeing how close he would let me get to him. I sometimes got within twenty to thirty yards. He would jerk round facing me, throw up his head, and snort, and stamp with his fore feet, and then turn round and walk slowly away.

*Baboons and Monkeys.* I do not remember coming across or hearing of the dog-faced baboon in the North-Eastern Muri hills nor in the Mumuye hills, though they were numerous in thick forest belts along the river. I had an experience and a lesson from them in December 1909 when travelling by barge on transfer from Jalingo to Abinsi. I landed early one morning after kob on what I thought was an island but found it was joined to the mainland by a wide expanse of sand. I took one poler as gun-bearer and sent the barge on down-stream to stop later on for breakfast. The kob had disappeared but a troop of baboons were barking in the trees in the mainland. I foolishly took a shot at one sitting on the top of a tree. The whole pack, forty or fifty strong, came out and formed up in a line across my front, the men in front and the women and children behind. We continued our walk towards them and they gradually retreated, forming a line on our left flank and then behind us, following us. Gradually they began to move off one by one into the trees and finally the lot disappeared. I noticed there was no barking during the whole of this operation.

I saw the beautiful black and white colobus monkey from time to time in the forest belts along the river. I once saw two hunting dogs come out on to a bush path in the Tiv Country North of Katsina Ala. They quickly disappeared, but there was no mistaking their blotched colouring and large bat-like ears.

I had a pangolin brought to me at Abinsi. These creatures must be very strong for their size. I put it in an empty beer case with a full case on the top but by the next morning it had moved the top case sufficiently to escape. If my memory is correct, a beer case consisted of several dozen bottles.

*Hyena* were to be found throughout the area to my knowledge from Lokoja to Lau. They wandered almost nightly amongst the bungalows in Lokoja and one was shot at on the verandah of the Treasurer's bungalow early in 1909. They scavenged in and around Abinsi, Ibi and Lau towns.

*Jackals.* Mr. Lewis questions whether jackal are found in West Africa. The Benue Valley is, I think, too far south for them but they were common in the more northern Emirates. I watched one sitting in the moonlight in the middle of Daura Town with its head up howling, a truly dreadful noise. Cheetah and caracal, the desert lynx, also do not, I think, occur so



far south : but a cheetah passed me within thirty yards in a reed bed near Katagum, when I had an empty shot-gun in my hand, and I was later given two cubskins. A hunter offered me a lynx cub in Hadejia and when I refused it, he released it, but it stayed near my house and I tamed it sufficiently to take raw meat off a plate on my knee though I could not touch it. Unfortunately I was transferred before this interesting experiment could develop.

Most of the details on North-East Muri given in this article are taken from a diary kept during the Political and Military Wurkum-Tangale Border Patrol of May/June 1909. There were some strange rumours current in those parts. In the Bashar-Yuli neighbourhood there was a story of a subterranean river which formed a morass, covered with luxuriant grass, in which an elephant and an antelope were said to be engulfed.

The Patrol was followed into the Wurkum hills by a number of Hausa traders. In addition to salt trading, they were said to be seeking a hoard of elephant ivory, collected and hidden in the hills after the rinderpest epidemic mentioned above. They had no success. But there was a sequel to this story. Two or three years later I was touring the Tiv Country with a W.A.F.F. escort, one of whom was a giant of a man known on the Company's strength as Pte. Moma Wirikin (sic). He turned out to be a Wurkum pagan and told me he was the son of Sarkin Kirum and proposed to return home when he was time-expired and succeed his father. He assured me that the ivory story was true, and that he knew where the tusks were hidden. This man was immensely powerful and carried me on his shoulders through many rivers and swamps.

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## Regional Governments and Wild Life

By P. A. Allison

**I**T is a great credit to the present Regional Governments of Nigeria that during the past few years they have done more for the preservation of wild life than was achieved during all the years of Colonial rule, and I feel that it is high time that mention was made of this fact in *The Nigerian Field*, whose readers must be supposed to have these matters very much at heart.

On the 1st of December, 1955, Mr. R. Coulthard, a retired Senior Veterinary Officer, was appointed Game Warden by the Government of the Northern Region. Since April the 1st, 1957, provision has been made